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Sider's Ontologese Introduction Instructions

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Abstract: In response to Hirsch's deflationary arguments, Sider attempts to introduce a special Ontologese quantifier to preserve the substantivity of fundamental debates in metaphysics. He claims that this strategy can be effected by two distinct means, one of which is a list of instructions for metaphysicians, which he argues suffice to give the new quantifier a meaning that carves nature at the joints. I argue that these instructions will not allow someone to start speaking Ontologese if their prior language is sufficiently deviant with respect to it, and that natural languages may be in just such a position.

Keywords: Ontologese, Sider, metaphysics, metametaphysics

I

THE NOTION OF A SPECIAL ontological language is becoming more commonly invoked in analytic philosophy, and it is important to raise objections before it becomes orthodoxy. The most prominent advocate is Sider, who argues that, although there might be many decent languages for various purposes, only one is suited to fundamental ontology, namely Ontologese. The structure and vocabulary of this language are supposed to make it uniquely suited to saying what there is (although, as we shall see, this statement is somewhat misleading). The issue has been heatedly debated in a series of papers by Sider and Hirsch; the aim of this article is to add to the discussion by posing a problem for one of Sider's methods of introducing the Ontologese quantifier. Specifically, I will argue that we cannot, except in very favourable circumstances, start speaking Ontologese by using one of Sider's canonical methods. I will further argue that appeal to "practice" cannot solve this defect. Thirdly, we see that, under a plausible assumption about linguistic intentions, a parallel problem arises for Sider's other canonical method of speaking Ontologese. Finally, I will argue that considerations of context and eligibility are not jointly sufficient for evading (either version of) the problem, because if we construe Ontologese as Sider proposes, then neither the speaker nor their interlocutors will know what their own words mean, which is an intolerable consequence.

Sider concedes that the English quantifiers might not "express fundamental quantification". However, he does think that we can introduce, by stipulation, a

quantifier that lacks the deficiencies of the English idiom (Sider, 2011, pp. 171–172). Ontologese, according to Sider, is the language of the “metaphysics room”, in contrast to the messy “marketplace” of ordinary language. To make sure that everyone is speaking correctly, Sider gives two distinct methods of introducing the new language:

1. **The Official Method:** Stipulate that your existential quantifier has the most natural, eligible, fundamental, joint-carving meaning in the (semantic) vicinity of the English expression ‘there is’. If there is such a meaning, the proposal succeeds and we all speak Ontologese (Sider, 2008, p. 412).
2. **The Nominalistic Method:** For those who are unwilling to quantify over meanings, as in the official method, Sider provides a list of nominalized instructions for speaking the language:

Instructions for Introducing Ontologese: i) introduce a symbol, ‘ \exists ’, with the grammar of the familiar existential quantifier; ii) stipulate that no philosophically contentious sentences count toward your use of ‘ \exists ’—only its core inferential role counts; iii) have the concept of a restriction on a quantifier and explicitly disavow all such restrictions; iv) intend by using ‘ \exists ’ to speak as fundamentally as possible; explain what this means by contrasting your austere intentions for ‘ \exists ’ with your rough and ready everyday use of English quantificational language such as ‘there are many ways to win this chess match’, ‘Jones and I have nothing in common’, and so on. (Sider, 2008, p. 415)

The hope is that any ontological debates, even if they are non-substantive in English, are substantive in Ontologese (Sider, 2008, p. 415). As its name suggests, the official method is Sider’s position, though he claims that the nominalistic method is also viable (Sider, 2008, pp. 415–416). The official method is the subject of much discussion in the literature, but here I will focus on the nominalistic method.

Ontologese is supposed to be a “better” language than English, when it comes to ontological matters, since its quantificational structure much better matches that of The World. It looks like Sider has given his metaphysically-inclined colleagues a means for debating any claims of the form ‘there is Φ ’ substantively — just sit down in the philosophy room, agree to carve at the joints, and let the disagreement begin!

Sider pre-empts a deflationary criticism of this shift to Ontologese. He imagines a scenario in which a metaphysician makes the following pronouncement: “by ‘dirt’ I shall mean the element of the periodic table in which trees grow, which forms mud when combined with water, and which is flattened to make country roads” (Sider, 2011, p. 172). Of course, the problem with this speech is that no such element of the periodic table exists. Sider (2011, p. 172) imagines

that the deflationist will be dissatisfied with the stipulated quantifier for analogous reasons — you cannot carve at the joints, because there are no joints at which to carve! However, whether the dirt speech is successful depends on whether *there exists* a particular element of the periodic table. But logical joints, whatever they may be, are not supposed to be elements of Sider's ontology (2011, pp. 12–14). So it cannot be that the success of introducing the new quantifier is determined in the *very same* way as the dirt proposal. Indeed my objection to Sider's position is not that there aren't such logical joints;¹ rather the objection occurs at the meta-level in denying that any sense has been given to the phrase 'logical joints' (and related terminology) that allows us to shift from speaking English to speaking Ontologese by using the nominalized instructions. I also hope that this will shed some light on why the official method is not promising either.

II

My central objection to the nominalistic method of introducing Ontologese is that obeying the instructions given is consistent with failing to speak Ontologese at all. As a secondary criticism, even if someone were actually speaking it, then no one (including the speaker) could determine that this was so. Of course, this situation is in a sense quite normal; if I were to "read" out loud from a textbook in an unfamiliar language, there is a sense in which I would be speaking the language, albeit poorly, without knowing what language I am speaking. The case of Ontologese is distinct, though, in that it might be *impossible* to determine whether or not we are speaking it, and I take it that this problem is much more severe.²

With respect to the nominalistic strategy, I think we can show directly that it results in scenarios in which the speaker is speaking a language and that this fact is in-principle unknowable. Consider an example of someone who would deny that there was a language which was uniquely privileged with respect to metaphysical discourse, Putnam's (1987, p. 77) cosmopolitan. She is equally fluent in two different ways of talking about the world, and at different times, uses different "logical primitives" or "notions of object" (Putnam, 1987, p. 71). But Sider wants her to speak Ontologese, so that she can appreciate all of the high-stakes metaphysical debates that she can currently only see as being verbal. I will follow

1 I am, however, sceptical.

2 In the case of the official strategy, if there are suitable logical joints, but we had not established the fact, executing the strategy would result in a scenario in which we did not know which language we were speaking. Whether this difficulty would be accidental, as in the textbook case, or a deeper issue altogether depends on our ability to verify Sider's thesis about the logical structure of reality. As a thorough discussion would take us too far afield, I can only hope that the reader is suspicious of our ability to conclusively establish such a contentious philosophical thesis.

Button (2013, p. 214) in calling her ‘Poly’. Though our dialectical strategies will diverge, for now the kind of argument that Button levels against his “hardcore realist” works just as well against the realist who wants to speak Ontologese via the nominalistic method.

Suppose Poly is fluent in two languages, which embody different philosophical perspectives on the existence of composite objects. Let one language be Nihilish, the speakers of which say all the sorts of things mereological nihilists say, and the other be Universalish, the speakers of which say all the kinds of things we would expect to hear from mereological universalists when it comes to the existence of composite objects. When she is speaking either language, she is happy to regard as true what typical speakers of the language so regard. Since she happily flip-flops between these languages, Poly is one day a nihilist, and the next a universalist. Now, suppose that Sider gives Poly the instruction sheet. As required, she very sincerely forms the intention to mean the most metaphysically excellent meaning in the vicinity of all her logical terminology, and speaks in the most strict, literal and unrestricted way she can. No trickery is intended on her part.

She tries her very hardest, thinks about fundamentality and the nature of quantification, and contrasts examples of very natural predicates with disjunctive or gerrymandered variants. Finally, she thinks she is on to something, and comes to believe that the best description of the world must be couched in a language whose quantifier was unrestricted and fundamental, and which uses the most perfectly natural meaning of ‘there is’. By the end of the day, she has renounced universalism and denies sentences like ‘there are tables’, ‘there are trout-turkeys’, and similar. Sider can go home satisfied — it seems as though Poly can now speak Ontologese. Whether or not she is correct in her mereological views, she appears to have started speaking in the right way to do fundamental metaphysics. Although we cannot conclusively rule out the danger that she is employing a deviant interpretation of the language in question, she certainly sounds like other metaphysicians do when they speak on fundamental matters.

However, there is a snag. The next day, Poly starts speaking Universalish, rather than what she yesterday took to be Ontologese — even though she is in the metaphysics room! In an attempt to correct her mistake, Sider reads out the list of instructions again, and Poly once more disavows deviant quantification and promises never to use gerrymandered predicates ever again. The problem is that, while she is speaking Universalish, the quantifier that looks the most unrestricted is the one that ranges over arbitrary composite objects, and so despite her intention to speak Ontologese, she assents to all kinds of bizarre sentences, like ‘there are trout-turkeys’ and ‘there are in-cars’.

The purpose of this story is to illustrate the following: as far as we know, everyday English might carve nowhere near nature's joints. If so, obeying the instructions provided in the nominalistic method is insufficient to take a speaker from their non-joint-carving language to Ontologese. Poly, in her Universalish moments, cannot see that she is using (what in her Nihilish moments she would call) an extravagant quantifier rather than the most fundamental one. The reason that she cannot see it is because 'fundamental' is an established term in Universalish with a meaning that does not match (what Sider argues is) the most fundamental meaning in the vicinity. So when, in Universalish, she intends to speak as "fundamentally" as possible she will not intend the same thing as she did the day before when she intended to speak in the most "fundamental" way, where 'fundamental' is an established term in Nihilish. For the Universalish-speaker, it is perfectly natural to say 'there are trout-turkeys'; to the Nihilish-speaker, however, the utterance is aberrant.

Importantly, Sider does not deny this point; indeed he considers it an open possibility that adopting a new quantifier requires altering the meaning of *every* predicate (presumably including 'fundamental', 'natural' and 'eligible') (Sider, 2014, p. 571, n. 8). So, if our ordinary strict-and-literal quantification in English does not match the structure of Ontologese, then our intention to speak in conformity with the instructions given by Sider will be the wrong intention, for the same reason that Poly, when speaking Universalish, had the wrong intentions when she executed the instruction sheet. So there is no way of determining whether the language that anyone, including oneself, is currently speaking is actually Ontologese or not.³

There is one important respect in which the story might be misleading. Typical speakers of Universalish will go about uttering sentences expressing mereological principles such as that of unrestricted composition. But isn't 'if x and y exist, and are non-identical, then their sum exists' a "philosophically contentious" sentence, which Sider specifically instructs us to disregard as contributing to the meaning of the quantifier in favour of "core inferential" considerations only? If so, then Universalish *could not* be Ontologese, and the case poses no problem for Sider at all. Similarly, if speaking Nihilish *trivially* entails the truth of 'there are no trees', then that language could not be Ontologese either. It is not that mereological universalism and mereological nihilism could not possibly be *true* when expressed in Ontologese; rather the principles underpinning such views could not determine

3 Of course, in some cases, two languages would share a meaning for terms like 'fundamental' and 'joint-carving'. So my argument is not that the attempt to speak Ontologese via the nominalist method will *always* backfire in the sense illustrated, but rather that it might do so, and if it does we will be none the wiser.

the interpretation of the Ontologese quantifier. After all, the introduction of Ontologese by Sider is designed to make sure that metaphysical disputes are substantive, not to automatically solve them.⁴

In response, I would stress that delimiting the “core inferential role” of logical vocabulary is just as philosophically contentious as determining the principles of mereology. We could re-cast the above story, with Poly as one day a realist, and the other an anti-realist (in Dummett’s (1978) sense) with respect to some domain. In this case, rather than flip-flopping over metaphysical principles, Poly could simply flip-flop between classical and intuitionistic logic. Such flip-flopping would still carry existential implications, and yet the dispute between classical and intuitionistic logic is *precisely* a dispute about the inferential role of the logical vocabulary, quantifiers included. In short, the core inferential role of the quantifier is just as philosophically contentious as plenty of metaphysical-looking semantic rules are. So, if the core inferential role of the English quantifier is sufficiently distinct from the role that the Ontologese quantifier ought to have, then when we intend to consider only the core inferential role in stipulating the semantics of a new quantifier, we will not form the right intention after all.

It is worth stressing that Poly’s inability to execute the instructions properly is not an ordinary case of interpretative deviancy. There might, for instance, be a person for whom Sider’s instructions read like a recipe for mushroom bisque, and yet that is no threat to Sider’s position.⁵ Quite so; but the reason there is no threat is that if there were such a person, then an attempt to execute the instructions would be an attempt (perhaps unsuccessful) to cook up a delicious mushroom bisque. Importantly, Sider could determine that they had not understood the instructions correctly, whereas in the Poly case she might have gone for an entire career professing to speak Ontologese but failing to do so, and no one, not Sider and not even herself, would have had a clue that she had misunderstood.

Hirsch (2008, pp. 520–521) offers an argument that bears some similarity to the one presented above. He imagines a character who sincerely intends to speak the world’s oldest language, and then goes on to speak fluently in Hebrew. Hirsch, quite rightly, insists that we are correct to characterize them as speaking Hebrew, rather than claim that they are doing a terrible job of speaking Sumerian. Similarly, philosophers might well intend to speak Ontologese on their way into the philosophy room without actually managing to do so. Sider (2014, p. 567) responds by pointing out a dis-analogy between the two cases, namely that the English-speaker already understands the lexicon, grammar and much of the semantics of Ontologese (since it is supposed to vary as little as possible from

4 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

5 Thanks to an anonymous referee for this amusing formulation of the problem.

English), whereas the Hebrew-speaker is in the same position as anyone else (at least, anyone else who is not an accomplished Cuneiformist) in being ignorant of Sumerian lexicon, grammar and semantics.

The utility of bringing Poly into the picture, then, is that she understands both of the languages in question perfectly well, cutting Sider's response to Hirsch out of the picture. Moreover, Poly presents a more fundamental problem for Sider than does Hirsch's character. In the Hebrew–Sumerian case, what is missing is a simple piece of knowledge, namely that Sumerian is an older language than Hebrew. If Hirsch's character had known this, the speaker could have recalibrated their intentions with their verbal behaviour in an unproblematic way either by attempting to speak Sumerian or intending to speak Hebrew. This is clearly not the position in which Poly finds herself. Meaning, unlike age, is a feature “internal” to a language. Hirsch's character could discover their mistake in Hebrew (by reading about Sumerian, perhaps), whereas nothing Poly could do ought to convince her to assent to sentences like “fundamental’ does not mean fundamental’.

III

There are two routes that Sider might take in order to respond to the kind of argument put forward in the last section. A first strategy might be to concede that mere obedience to the instruction sheet is indeed insufficient for aspiring metaphysicians to learn Ontologese. Sider (2004, p. 680) has argued that with respect to English, we can use a method that he calls “innocent coaching” in order to see that metaphysicians' locutions are not so strange after all. Since Sider is increasingly relying on his Ontologese theory to respond to deflationism, rather than focus on the metasemantics of English (Sider, 2014, p. 565), perhaps the coaching proposal can be reformulated as a method for learning Ontologese without commitment to reified meanings. We could perhaps come to grasp the Ontologese quantifier by using the sign that is explicitly introduced for it, and have our use of it corrected and encouraged by metaphysicians during debates in the philosophy room until our behaviour suggests that we have hit upon the intended meaning.

The problem is that there are no means by which the would-be metaphysicians can be effectively coached. Part ii of Sider's instructions is the stipulation that no philosophically contentious sentence is to count toward the interpretation of the Ontologese quantifier. In other words, the only uses of the quantifier that go into determining its meaning are those that are philosophically uncontentious. It is pretty clear that this amounts to a blanket ban on use determining meaning, since, as we saw, even the core inferential role of the quantifier is the subject of

philosophical controversy. Furthermore, since there are no philosophical problems that have paradigm solutions that can be intersubjectively verified by tutors and peers, as there are in science and mathematics, all Sider has to go on when coaching his students is their avowal to be obeying the quantifier-introduction instructions. But as we saw, obedience to the instructions is consistent with not speaking Ontologese.

It is worth noting that this is the reason that Ontologese theorists cannot fall back on a similar proposal, namely that ‘there is’, ‘fundamental’, ‘natural’, etc. are technical terms of Ontologese, which are to be learned through actual debate in the metaphysics room, and through careful study of examples present in Sider’s book and elsewhere. Unlike more ordinary theoretical terms, the Ontologese ‘there is’ has no cases of use from which to learn its meaning, since I take it that even Sider’s stock examples of the fundamental (such as the red/blue world; Sider, 2011, pp. 1–2) are just as philosophically contentious as anything else, and are thus ruled out from contributing to the meaning of the Ontologese quantifier-expression. Furthermore, if these examples are in English, then it is unclear how they could illuminate the meaning of the Ontologese, rather than the English, expressions. This is because those expressions of Ontologese have English counterparts the meanings of which we have prior understanding of; for example, the Ontologese quantifier does not mean existence, but something else of which we have no independent understanding. And if the examples are in Ontologese, then they plainly cannot help in facilitating the understanding of Ontologese, any more than a monoglot English speaker can learn the meaning of ‘Es gibt’ by looking it up in a German schoolbook.

Rather than focus on coaching, Sider’s later account of what uniquely fixes the correct interpretation of our words in the metaphysics room is that The World itself does the fixing. Specifically, the meanings of our expressions, including logical vocabulary, are fixed because some “candidate meanings” for those expressions are more *eligible* than others.

Eligibility considerations are supposed to function as a kind of semantic “anchor” that allows one to introduce a term by a definite description of its intended meaning in a manner akin to an ostensive definition (Sider, 2011, p. 75). The procedure would be to define the meaning, if any, of the Ontologese quantifier-expression as the most eligible meaning in the vicinity of ‘there is’. The extent of this “vicinity” is determined by us when we fix the grammatical and inferential role of the expression. In this case, we have a guarantee that the meaning of ‘ \exists ’ will be a quantifier-meaning, assuming that there is some meaning close enough to satisfy the definite description.

Given the explicit quantification over meanings here, it is clear that this is not going to be a nominalistically acceptable strategy. Indeed, it is simply the official

strategy outlined in section I. Although it is an importantly separate strategy, I think the arguments earlier deployed against the nominalistic strategy also serve to cast some doubt on the official strategy too.

It seems to me that considerations of eligibility will get Sider no further toward us speaking Ontologese than did his original instruction sheet. Suppose that Poly is speaking a language where the meaning of 'eligible' is so deeply ineligible that its meaning is nowhere near the meaning of the Ontologese expression 'eligible'. If this happens, then there is simply no eligible meaning in the vicinity of her expression for her to mean, so her intention to speak with the most "eligible" meanings in the vicinity of her words will not be the same intention that Sider has when he intends to speak eligibly.

So just as with the instruction sheet, Poly will not form the right intention when she intends her words to have (what she takes to be) the most eligible meanings, since her understanding of 'eligible' will be intimately tied up with her (deviant) understanding of 'fundamental', 'natural', and related expressions. Hence, when she intends to use (what she takes to be) the most eligible meaning of 'there is', she will not express what the Ontologese speaker does by using 'existence', but rather the deviant quantificational concept she had to begin with. So the most that eligibility considerations will do for Sider is show that someone speaking a language with a sufficiently eligible meaning of 'eligible' will successfully shift to speaking Ontologese when they attempt to execute the official strategy.

The reason that I am more hesitant to endorse this kind of response to the official strategy than in the case of the nominalist strategy is that it seems to rely on a contentious thesis about intentions. In the nominalist case, we have already taken a certain degree of semantic ascent; since the instructions are sentences written in a language, in order to (deliberately) obey the instructions we need to form the intention that we conform to what we understand the sentences expressing them to require. In contrast, the official strategy simply requires that someone *have* a particular intention, not that they understand the instruction to have a particular intention. In consequence, the argument of the previous paragraph does not work unless there is some close connection between the having of a linguistic intention and the ability to express it. If such a connection holds, then the intentions that the official strategy requires one to have in order to speak Ontologese will only be available to those who already speak a language that is close enough to Ontologese that they can express such an intention.

In this case, the official strategy would, like the nominalistic strategy, fail to shift "deviant" speakers from their starting language into Ontologese. The argument does not rely on an assumption as strong as thinking that all our intentions must be articulable. Rather, it relies on the assumption that one can only intend to mean Φ if one can either already express Φ , or can gesture to the correct usage

of an expression for Φ in someone else's linguistic practice. I don't have an explicit argument that this principle is correct, but it strikes me as plausible. In any case, the argument against the specifically nominalist strategy that it the main focus of this paper goes through untouched by such considerations.

Hirsch (2008, pp. 521–522) offers an argument for a similar conclusion; however, his argument relies on Sider accepting two contentious principles about how joint-carving is supposed to work, principles to which Sider (2014, pp. 569–570) has argued that he is not committed. To some extent, then, this argument can be taken to be an improvement on Hirsch's insofar as it requires no such principles.

At this point, I take myself to have shown that neither written instructions, nor time spent in the metaphysics room, offers a nominalistically acceptable strategy for speaking Ontologese, since both of these procedures can be faithfully followed by someone who cannot speak Ontologese. Further, if linguistic intentions are somewhat tied to our ability to express them, then eligibility considerations are also insufficient for a speaker to speak Ontologese, unless she was *already* speaking Ontologese, or a sufficiently similar language. If so, then she could have formed the correct intentions when executing the instructions, because the vicinity of her expressions such as 'fundamentally' would include the referentially "magnetic" meaning of the Ontologese expression 'fundamentally'.

That said, we have yet to be given a reason to think that quantifiers in natural language have a sufficiently close meaning. Indeed, the belief that natural languages do not have quantifiers suitable for fundamental metaphysics is the key motivation for moving to Ontologese, so we may indeed suspect that the meanings *are not* sufficiently close. Some Ontologese theorists, such as Dorr (2005), are inclined to say that we have been speaking fundamentally all along (at least, that we have done so in the metaphysics room). This position is interestingly distinct from Sider's, but is not my concern in this article. Rather, my arguments are directed specifically at those who, like Sider, want to start speaking a *new* language. And I take it that such people will not think we are already speaking Ontologese, since this would decisively undermine the motivation for taking up their own position in the dialectic.

IV

A final option, which is certainly not Sider's, but that perhaps fits the spirit of his project, might be to bite the bullet and accept that interlocutors in the metaphysics room cannot shift to speaking Ontologese via the nominalistic method.⁶ However, the

6 And perhaps even by the official method as well, if our linguistic intentions are linked to our abilities of expression and/or ostension as suggested in the last section.

claim would be that in certain contexts (e.g., when we are not speaking “loosely”) our expressions refer to the most eligible meaning in the vicinity (in the Ontologese sense of ‘eligible’), whether we intended them to do so or not. So those in the metaphysics room, as long as they are all taking the exercise seriously, would all be carving nature at the joints. This metasemantic picture is somewhat ad hoc, since it has little independent appeal or motivation, but it might seem that the price is worth paying for freedom from the kind of deflationary arguments urged by Hirsch and others.

Unfortunately, this merely trades one form of scepticism for another, and will do nothing to show that fundamental metaphysics is possible in the way that Sider hopes for. Existential debates would indeed be substantive, but would be radically defective in a different way. We can assume that we know when we are in the context of the metaphysics room, and so it is guaranteed that we are all speaking the same language when we do metaphysics. The new problem is that this would make it impossible for us to know what our own words meant in our mouths, in any non-trivial sense. Sider has conceded that there are several candidate meanings in the vicinity of key expressions; after all, that was what prompted the Ontologese idea in the first place. But how do we find out which of the candidate meanings for ‘exists’ was indeed the most natural one? We will know that all the instances of the trivial schema ‘The expression ‘ Φ ’ means Φ ’ are true. But we will not be able to express the meaning of our Ontologese expressions in any more illuminating terms.

A return to Poly’s scenario will help to illustrate the problem. Sider, in English, pledges to mean the most natural meaning of ‘exists’, and Poly (speaking Universalish) pledges similarly. Thanks to the fact that they are in the metaphysics room, they know that they both mean the same thing, namely the most fundamental sense of ‘exists’. Assuming that one of them was already using the most natural candidate meaning, the question arises as to which one had the most eligible concepts to begin with. Sider will of course think that he got it right, and that Poly’s prior use of the word ‘exists’ was gerrymandered and unnatural, so that when she uses the (Ontologese) expression ‘exists’ she means that in the Siderian sense, and makes all sorts of false claims about the existence of trees. But Poly will no doubt think that her use was the right one all along, and that Sider is now making all sorts of false assertions about the non-existence of trees. The reason that they will think they were right all along is that their previous use of a quantifier-expression that was not the Ontologese one is all they have to go on when considering what they might now be meaning, since the instructions, coaching, and so forth give us no clues as to what we might mean in Ontologese, as I have argued previously. If Sider and Poly are not so adamant that they know what they mean, there will be no debate to be had at all, for the same reason that you and I could not debate the existence of gumberdashers; namely that neither of us know what ‘gumberdashers’ means at all!

A more illuminating illustration can be taken from model theory. As Quine (1964, pp. 211–212) shows, every consistent first-order theory has a model in the natural numbers, thanks to the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem and Gödel's arithmetization of syntax. We can think of Poly and Sider as in the following position: they both put forward their own metaphysical theories in order to debate about them. Sider gives his favoured theory, and Poly the typical Universalist one. In virtue of the metasemantic picture under consideration, we know that the dispute is substantive, because all their words mean the most eligible thing they could, regardless of Poly and Sider's intentions. So assuming that the theories are consistent, they both have the same interpretation, in the model theoretic sense. However, neither of them has any means to determine whether or not that interpretation is the one they intended; indeed for all either of them know the most eligible interpretation is simply a "Pythagorean" one whose domain is the natural numbers.

Korman (2015) offers what at first sight may appear to be a similar argument. He quite rightly insists that, if we do not make the unwarranted assumption that the Ontologese expression 'there is' means the same as its English counterpart, then we are not in a position to assess the truths of claims about what "exists" in the Ontologese sense (e.g., Korman, 2015, p. 311). This is importantly distinct from the line of argument I am urging in this section. Korman's position, I take it, is epistemic in character; he writes that "we lose our anchor for assessing the resultant ontological theses" (Korman, 2015, p. 316), and suggests that new arguments for the Ontologese analogues of standard ontological positions would need to be looked for. My position, on the other hand, is semantic; I would sooner claim that we lose our anchor for meaning anything at all by our ontological theses. An expression that could mean anything might as well mean nothing, and under the picture presently being considered, the existential claims made by Polly and Sider might mean anything at all, though by construction they mean the same thing. Moreover, I have argued that we have no reason to expect there to be any method by which we can offer any further elucidation of the meanings of Ontologese expressions. Korman (2015, p. 302) specifically distances himself from making such semantic proposals, so I take it that our aims and arguments, though perhaps complementary, are quite properly distinct.

In summary, if we follow the proposal of this section to ensure that all our metaphysical debates will be substantive, we will have no idea as to what we are actually arguing about, and so we will not even know what we have said the world is fundamentally like, let alone know what the world is fundamentally like. This is also the key to seeing why metaphysicians cannot start speaking Ontologese merely by semantic deference to Sider. We could say "by 'joint carving', I shall mean whatsoever Sider means by that expression". But unless Sider can

explain to us, in English, what he means, the possibility remains that everyone in the metaphysics room has no idea what their words mean. Unless, of course, we were already speaking something similar to Ontologese, but as we have seen there is no reason for Sider to think that this is so, and several reasons for him to deny it.

V

I have not attempted to show that Ontologese is not a possible language; what I do hope to have clarified is that suspicion of the notion need not flow from the belief that there is no special interpretation of our words corresponding to what the metaphysician wants from a language. Rather, the suspicion can come from a worry that we have no means of coming to speak a language with such an interpretation.

Further, I have not argued that no such method can be given. Rather, I have argued that the nominalistic method embodied in Sider's instruction sheet fails to do the job. This is because, if one speaks a language which employs an interpretation which is deviant relative to Ontologese, then one could nevertheless follow the instructions (by following them in a deviant, though sincere, fashion). Further, no one (even the speaker) will be able to determine whether they are speaking Ontologese. This argument, coupled with the stipulation that the use of our metaphysical terminology does not contribute to Ontologese meaning, shows that we cannot come to speak Ontologese by immersion in the practice of the metaphysics room either. Therefore executing Sider's instructions will only result in speaking Ontologese for those who already were; and if an individual carries out the instructions and is not speaking Ontologese afterwards, no one will be any the wiser.

This is significant because it shows that metaphysicians who wish to evade Hirsch-type deflationary arguments cannot do so by invoking Ontologese without explicit quantification over meanings; a construction with which many philosophers today are deeply uncomfortable. Further, I have argued that the problem can be extended to Sider's official method of introducing Ontologese by means of such quantification if we accept that an intention to mean Φ presupposes either the ability to articulate Φ or the ability to point to the use of an expression that successfully means Φ . This strikes me as plausible, given the link between meaning and linguistic practice, though I have no specific argument for it as a general principle.

Finally, I hope to have shown that it is not an option to fix the nominalistic strategy (or the official one, if it is indeed beset by a similar problem) by insisting that we all speak Ontologese regardless of our intentions, or by means of

semantic deference. To do so is simply to replace the initial worries with equally severe ones. Since such a metasemantic picture has little independent motivation, I think it is clear that if we are to introduce Ontologese by stipulation, we must be able to say something about those meanings in an antecedently understood language, and to know that we have done so. If I am right, we have been given no coherent suggestion for how to do this. Indeed, if we cannot do this, then it was deeply misleading of me to even describe Ontologese as supposedly being “uniquely suited to saying what there is”, since ‘what there is’ is an ordinary expression in English, not a special expression in Ontologese.

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